United Nations A/AC.286/WP.4

General Assembly

Distr.: General
22 February 2016

English only

Open-ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations[1]

Geneva 2016

Item 5 (b) of the agenda
Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations: recommendations on other measures that could contribute to taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, including but not limited to: (i) transparency measures related to the risks associated with existing nuclear weapons; (ii) measures to reduce and eliminate the risk of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional nuclear weapon detonations; and (iii) additional measures to increase awareness and understanding of the complexity of and interrelationship between the wide range of humanitarian consequences that would result from any nuclear detonation

Nuclear weapons and security: A humanitarian perspective

Submitted by Austria

1. One comment that is frequently heard in conjunction with the Humanitarian Initiative is that it supposedly does not take the "security dimension" of nuclear weapons sufficiently into account. This point has been made particularly in the context of the current more challenging geopolitical environment, which has resulted in greater emphasis being again put on nuclear deterrence. The argument goes along the lines that, as long as the security context remains as challenging, nuclear weapons and the security provided by nuclear deterrence are essential. While States that rely on nuclear weapons, thus, point to the essential contribution of nuclear weapons for their security, States supporting the humanitarian initiative have highlighted the threat to their security that results from the existence of nuclear weapons.

2. This working paper aims to examine the notion of the security provided by nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence from the perspective of the humanitarian initiative.

3. The case for nuclear deterrence is based on the credible threat of inflicting unacceptable destruction and consequences to a possible adversary, thus leading to restraint and rational behaviour on the part of all sides. The credibility of this threat is to be maintained with multiple nuclear strike and counter-strike capabilities of nuclear arsenals. At the same time, it is assumed that the threat alone will be sufficient in preventing that

[1] Established pursuant to resolution 70/33 of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

GE.16-02660(E)

Please recycle

nuclear weapons will have to be deployed. However, the credibility of the threat requires readiness to use nuclear weapons.

4. The humanitarian initiative has raised serious arguments that challenge the foundation of this logic. As demonstrated through current research, the mid- and longer-term atmospheric, climate and food-security consequences of even a "limited nuclear war" would be considerably more serious than previously understood and global in their effects. In addition to the immediate humanitarian emergency, the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons combined and systemic impact on health, economy, mass migration, social order etc. are as of yet not fully understood.

5. If one considers this interrelationship and the scale of the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, the notion of credible nuclear first and counter-strike capabilities becomes largely irrelevant. From this perspective, nuclear deterrence rests not only on the readiness to inflict mass destruction with global consequences, but also on the readiness and awareness to commit to an essentially – at least potentially – suicidal course of action, as the destruction and consequences would likely be unacceptable for friend and foe alike, indeed for all humanity. Ultimately, it is difficult to reconcile this with the underlying foundation of nuclear deterrence that it leads to rational behaviour of all actors involved. The threat is either credible, which requires – in light of the new evidence - readiness to act entirely irrationally. Alternatively, the threat is non-credible since rational analysis cannot lead to the conclusion of risking the use of nuclear weapons. If the combined effects of the immediate, mid- and long-term consequences are global, unacceptable and destructive for everybody, the threat itself becomes non-credible. What remains is the considerable danger of escalation in crisis situations and the trust or hope that situations would in the end not spiral out of control. There is indeed more awareness about such possible crisis situations in light of the current geopolitical tensions.

6. In order to avoid these consequences, however, a 100 per cent guarantee had to coexist that nuclear deterrence would never fail. As a result of the humanitarian initiative, there is today a better awareness and understanding of the risks associated with nuclear weapons, indicating that such a 100 per cent guarantee does not exist. There appears to be an inherent contradiction between maintaining nuclear weapons in a manner that demonstrates readiness to always use them, as required for the credibility of nuclear deterrence, and the need to ensure that they will never be used by accident, human or technical error. The examples of past "near misses" give evidence that good fortune has in the past on several occasions prevented nuclear accidents or miscalculations that could have resulted in nuclear war. The research on a broad range of different risk drivers has raised further serious doubts in this context. The measures that would be necessary to reduce risks associated with nuclear weapons, however, are the ones that would restrict the readiness to – always – use nuclear weapons, thereby apparently undermining the very case for nuclear deterrence.

7. Moreover, it is now widely understood that no adequate capacity exists, neither at the State nor at the international level to respond to the scope and scale of consequences of nuclear weapons explosions, should the nuclear deterrence construct ever fail. The conclusions and arguments drawn from the humanitarian initiative, thus, challenge the equation on the security narrower dimension provided by nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence. They underscore a widely shared concern that a continuation of a narrower security approach that rests and relies on these weapons poses too high a risk that may be based on a precarious illusion of security and safety.

8. The argument that the humanitarian initiative does not take the "security dimension" into account is therefore misleading. To the contrary, it puts the security at the centre of the debate and raises very serious issues and questions that challenge the narrower security perspective of States relying on nuclear weapons. Not only does the humanitarian

perspective raise valid concerns from the non-nuclear weapon States perspective as to the degree to which their own and their population's security may be threatened by the existence of these weapons in nuclear armed States. It equally raises questions to what extent the very security argument used by States that rely on nuclear weapons holds up to scrutiny. There is not a lower degree of danger for people living in nuclear armed States, on the contrary, the live under a heightened danger of a possible use of nuclear weapons against their country.

9. The humanitarian initiative looks at the consequences of nuclear weapons on human populations and the risks that are borne by all humanity by the continued existence of these weapons. The consequences would be trans-boundary and potentially global and impact on the security, well-being and survival of humans in nuclear armed States and non-nuclear weapons States alike. Consequently, the risks for the security of all may be far too high. At the core of the humanitarian initiative are therefore the questions about what security nuclear weapons provide and whose security should be focus of the nuclear weapons discourse and the international efforts to achieve a world without nuclear weapons.

10. A main function of the State is to protect and provide security to its population. In a "narrow security approach" the mere focus on State security triggers the question of the protection and security of the State's population. In a world driven by military logic nuclear weapons attract a counter strike. So the existence of nuclear weapons in a given State does not increase the protection and security of its population, but to the opposite lowers the protection and security of its population. A "narrow security approach" therefore does not appear to contradict the humanitarian approach. Rather, it leads to humanitarian considerations and reinforces the validity of the humanitarian approach.